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AFT News Release

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Thousands of AFT Members Attend March on Washington; President Randi Weingarten Addresses Crowd

WASHINGTON— Today, thousands of AFT members and leaders from more than a dozen states gathered for the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. AFT President Randi Weingarten addressed the march. She was joined by Asean Johnson, a 9-year-old student activist from Chicago's public schools.

Randi Weingarten
President, American Federation of Teachers
March on Washington
August 24, 2013
As Prepared for Delivery

I'm Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, a union that proudly supported the march 50 years ago, as we do again today.

Looking out, I see the beautiful diversity of our movement—all races, sexes, gay and straight and everything in between, civil rights activists, labor union members, DREAMers and communities of faith (including my synagogue, which sent a bus from New York).

Much has changed over these 50 years, but much remains to be done. That 1963 march, lifted by the thousands on this Mall and by Dr. King's soaring oration, helped create a better world, although we don't yet have the world King dreamed of.

So while many have written commemorations of the 1963 March on Washington, it would be wrong to stop there. Instead, this is a continuation of the righteous fight to achieve real justice and opportunity for all—at the voting booth, in our schools, in our workplaces and in our communities.

Yes, much remains to be done.



It's been decades since Birmingham police turned water cannons and police dogs on peaceful protesters. But it's only been months since the United States Supreme Court rolled back voting rights. And every day—in fact, every 30 minutes—a child is a victim of gun violence.

The “whites only” signs may be gone, but there are still signs of injustice all around us. Children born poor today are likely to stay poor. High-poverty schools where kids need so much more are provided so much less. And discrimination based on race or sexual orientation may no longer be legal, but we know that it can still be lethal.

Martin Luther King, Bayard Rustin, A. Philip Randolph and John Lewis (who is with us today) understood the intersection between racial equality and economic justice. They understood that the struggle for civil rights is a struggle for good jobs, with decent wages. And, while it is not the only solution, they understood, as we do now, that educational opportunity is the highway to economic opportunity.

An excellent public education for all children is an economic necessity, an anchor of democracy, a moral imperative and a fundamental civil right—without which none of our other rights can be fully realized.

And so, on this 50th anniversary, it is time to reclaim the promise of public education—not as it is today or was in the past, but as it can be to fulfill our collective obligation to help all children succeed, with great neighborhood schools; safe and welcoming environments; teachers who are free to teach, not just test; art and music; and the wraparound services that address students' social, health and emotional needs.

So while we have far to go, we have come so far. Martin Luther King Jr. couldn't sit at a segregated lunch counter in Alabama, but today an African-American man sits in the Oval Office. Bayard Rustin, the organizer of the 1963 march, was kept in the shadows because he was gay. Today, I speak as a teacher, a worker, a labor activist, and a gay person deeply committed to my faith.

We are a country that believes in equality, but we must be a country that acts on that belief. So let's take a lesson from King. Let's unite people of faith in a national day of prayer to end child poverty. Let's use sit-ins to oppose “stand your ground” laws. Let's have freedom rides to bring the message of equality to states that regard immigrants and same-sex couples as anything less than equal under the law. Let's all of us—not simply educators, parents and kids—stage nonviolent protests in districts that fail to invest in public education and that turn their backs on struggling schools.

A great nation ensures that every neighborhood public school is a good school. It adopts and enforces laws to make “working poor” a condition of the past. It takes great pains to prevent any child from going hungry. A nation is made great by its people constantly pushing it toward opportunity and justice.

We are all foot soldiers in these righteous battles. But our movement is not about us. It is about the next generation, and generations to follow.

And speaking of that next generation, I am proud to stand with a giant in the fight against the reckless school closures in Chicago, Asean Johnson.

Follow AFT President Randi Weingarten: <http://twitter.com/rweingarten>

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The AFT represents 1.5 million pre-K through 12th-grade teachers; paraprofessionals and other school-related personnel; higher education faculty and professional staff; federal, state and local government employees; nurses and healthcare workers; and early childhood educators.